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SECURITY COUNCIL
Fifty-third year

Letter dated 17 February 1998 from the Permanent Representative of Cyprus to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Upon instructions from my Government and further to my communications, the latest of which was dated 30 December 1997 (A/52/756-S/1997/1020), I have the honour to draw your attention to new provocative Turkish acts relating to the continuous and systematic plundering of the religious and cultural heritage in the occupied area of Cyprus.

Recently the following grave violations came to our attention:

- The Church of Apostle Andreas in the village of Panagra has been converted into a mosque;

- The Church of the Virgin Mary in the village of Aheritou, as reported in the Turkish Cypriot newspaper Ortam of 5 August 1997, has been vandalized and looted and is now being used as a sheep pen;

- The Church of the Virgin Mary in the village of Palekythro has been converted into a cultural centre.

Moreover, the following churches and cemeteries, after having been desecrated and looted, have been abandoned to deteriorate and, as a result, are now in danger of collapsing:

- The Church and cemetery of St. Tryphonas in the village of Vasili;

- The Church of St. Evlogios in the village of St. Theodoros;

- The Church of Saints Sergios and Vakhos in the village of St. George;

- The Church of the Archangel Michael in the village of Hartzia.

[Photographic evidence of all the above may be viewed at the Permanent Mission of Cyprus to the United Nations.]

It is sometimes claimed by the occupying Power, in order to justify its unlawful policies, that historic buildings can be given new functions related to the needs of contemporary life. One wonders whether turning a church into a sheep pen is "a new function given to historic buildings".

An additional pertinent point that Turkey forgets is that it does not have the consent and permission of the rightful owners to alter the function of these historic buildings, which is permissible only under certain internationally accepted and legal circumstances.

It is obvious that what is happening to the religious and cultural properties in the occupied area of Cyprus is a direct violation of international law and, more specifically, the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

What we are witnessing is an officially sponsored, systematic and well-executed plan by Turkey to destroy by any ways and means the basic tenets of the civilization of Cyprus in an effort to distort history, alter the demographic character of the island and pursue a policy of division of the island.

Despite repeated requests for the protection and maintenance of the religious and cultural heritage in the occupied areas - a heritage that has evolved over thousands of years and survived even the Ottoman Empire - Turkey continues to display total contempt and disregard for the many requests of international organizations.

It is time to stop holding Cyprus and its people hostage to the past, and to start looking towards a common future of prosperity, democracy and enjoyment of human rights, including cultural rights, for all Cypriots without discrimination.

On behalf of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus, I wish once again to strongly protest against these wilful and deliberate acts of destruction and to request you to call upon Turkey to terminate its systematic policy of pillaging and obliterating the island's archaeological, historical and religious monuments.

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 61, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) S. ZACKHEOS
Ambassador
Permanent Representative